

DRAFT

**Management Plan
for the Coachella Valley Preserve System**

and
Environmental Assessment

November 2000



A Sikes Act Plan
Habitat Management Plan
Area of Critical Environmental Concern Management Plan
Ecological Reserve Management Plan

Prepared by the
Center for Natural Lands Management

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I. Introduction

The effective management of the Coachella Valley Preserve System is critical to meeting protection goals of the Habitat Conservation Plan which established the preserve system in 1986 (Anon. 1985). This plan represents the third iteration of management plans developed to guide and focus the management of the preserve system. The first plan was written in 1986 and the second in 1995. While long term goals remain the same, each iteration has set short term objectives which serve those goals. The objectives evolve as conditions change, objectives are successfully met, and technologies change and are improved. Periodically, it is vital to assess progress toward goals, review completion of past objectives, review methodologies, and to set new objectives.

This management plan has been developed with the input, cooperation, and review of: the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the California Parks Department, the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Center for Natural Lands Management (CNLM) and the University of California's Deep Canyon Desert Research Station.

II. Background

A. Preserve System History. In 1980 the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard (CVFTL), *Uma inornata*, was listed as threatened by the federal government, and listed as endangered by the state of California. To achieve adequate protection for this species a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) was developed under the authority of the 1982 amendment to the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) (Anon. 1985). The HCP was completed in June 1985, and approved by the USFWS in April of 1986. This was the first HCP completed after the 1982 amendment to the ESA and as such has, to a greater or lesser degree, provided a guidepost to all subsequent HCPs. The Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard HCP was signed by the County of Riverside, the nine cities of the Coachella Valley and the USFWS. The signing of the HCP allowed the USFWS to issue a Section 10(a)(1)(B) permit to the cities and County, allowing those signatories the ability to "take" CVFTL as long as the provisions of the HCP were met.

The CVFTL HCP provided for the creation of three separate preserves, with the intention of protecting separate sand sources and separate, viable population of CVFTL (Figure 1) in each. The names for the three preserves used in the original HCP are slightly different in this document for both simplicity and to avoid confusion. The three preserves are together referred to as the Coachella Valley Preserve System; separately they are the Thousand Palms Preserve (called the Coachella Valley Preserve in the HCP) located north of Interstate 10 and Bermuda Dunes, the Willow Hole Preserve (called the Willow Hole-Edom Hill reserve in the HCP) located on the western edge of Edom Hill - north of

Varner Avenue and east of Mountain View, and the Whitewater River Preserve (called the Whitewater River Floodplain Reserve in the HCP) located south of Interstate 10 between Indian Avenue and Gene Autry Trail. Approximate funding levels for the creation of the preserve system was as follows:

The Nature Conservancy	\$ 2,000,000
USFWS (LWCF)	\$ 9,300,000
CDFG (WCB)	\$ 1,000,000
BLM (through land exchanges)	\$ 6,000,000+
Mitigation Fees	\$ 7,000,000+

Mitigation fees of \$600/acre were collected by each of the cities and the County when grading permits were applied for within each of the jurisdictions. The fees were held, invested and dispersed by TNC at the direction of the Coachella Valley Preserve Management Committee, made up of CDFG, USFWS (Refuge), BLM, and TNC. The fees remained at \$600/ acre until a total of \$7,000,000 dollars was collected. This milestone was achieved in 1999, at which point the mitigation fee dropped to \$100/acre. Unless amended, the fees will remain at this level for the duration of the 30 year 10(a)(1)(B) permit, (2016).

In 1997 the Center for Natural Lands Management initiated a step-wise transition process with TNC, initially acting as TNC's agent with regard to Preserve System management issues, and eventually, in 2000, taking over all Preserve System responsibilities previously held by TNC. These responsibilities include hiring a Preserve Director, managing all public use facilities and issues, coordinating all monitoring and habitat management activities, providing annual reports, serving as a voting member on the Preserve Management Committee, and receiving, holding, investing and dispersing mitigation funds under the direction of the Preserve Management Committee. None of these responsibilities supersedes the authority and responsibilities of individual partners in matters pertaining to their properties. TNC remains a significant landowner within the Thousand Palms Preserve with a seat on the Preserve Management Committee.

Ownership, and therefore jurisdiction and responsibilities, within each of the three preserves varies considerably. The Thousand Palms Preserve is made up of the USFWS Coachella Valley National Wildlife Refuge, a CDFG Ecological Reserve, a BLM Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), the Indio Hills Palms State Park, as well as lands by the Center for Natural Lands Management (CNLM).

The Willow Hole Preserve is made up of both BLM ACEC lands as well as lands owned by the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy (a State Agency). The Whitewater River Preserve is owned by the Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) but is under a

management agreement to BLM to provide ecological management for the length of the Section 10(a)(1)(B) Permit (30 years, or until 2016). In 1990 the adjacent Indio Hills Palms State Park was added to the preserve system as a portion of the Thousand Palms Preserve. State Parks was then added as a voting member of the Management Committee. owned by TNC and CNLM. Despite this varied ownership, the Coachella Valley Preserve System strives to provide for cooperative management for all its sites under the coordination of the Coachella Valley Preserve Committee. Approximate current ownership within the Preserve System is as follows:

Ownership	Acres	Percent
Thousand Palms Preserve		
Bureau of Land Management	9,774	50
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	3,709	23
CA Parks Department	2,060	14
CA Dept. Fish and Game	528	4
The Nature Conservancy	1,161	8
CV Water District	112	1
Private	15	<1
TOTAL	17,359	
Willow Hole Preserve		
Bureau of Land Management	1,863	93
CV Mountains Conservancy	131	7
TOTAL	1,994	
Whitewater River Preserve		
CV Water District (Managed by BLM)	1,149	98
Bureau of Land Management	25	2
TOTAL	1,175	
CV Preserve System Total	20,245	

B. Relationship to Federal/State Law and Plan Conformance. The Coachella Valley Preserve System Management Plan is written under the authority of: the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 [43 United States Code (U.S.C.) 1701-1782, Public Law (P.L.) 98-540]; the ESA as amended [16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq., P.L. 93-205]; National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act [16 U.S.C. 668 dd]; Fish and Wildlife Improvement Act [16 U.S.C. 7429]; Sikes Act [P.L. 93-452/95-420]; the State of California Public Resources Code Div. 5, 5080.30, Chapter 5.2.

This plan complies with: the Coachella Valley Preserve System Memorandum of Understanding (as amended January 1991); the BLM-CDFG Master Memorandum of Understanding of June 1983; BLM-USFWS Memorandum of Understanding of December 1986; the BLM-TNC Memorandum of Understanding of March 1990; and Addendum No. 2 (1984) to the Master Memorandum of Understanding between BLM and CDFG which provides for comprehensive wildlife habitat management plans to be developed in cooperation with both agencies, under Title II of the Sikes Act.

This plan conforms with: the *California Desert Conservation Area Plan* (BLM, 1980, as amended); the California Desert District Fire management Activity Plan (BLM, 1994); CVFTL HCP (1986); the CVFTL Recovery Plan (USFWS 1985) and the following USFWS Biological Opinions: 1) Public Equestrian and Hiking Trail System within the Coachella Valley Preserve, Riverside Co., California (1-1-84-F-52); 2) Protective Fencing of Three Preserves in the Coachella Valley, Riverside Co., California (1-1-86-F-53); 3) Right-of-Way grant to the Coachella Valley Water District (CVWD) (1-1-84-F-17); 4) Leasing of Land for Wind Energy Development (1-1-82-F-114) and 5) BLM initiated Wind Energy Development Biological Opinion (1-6-99-F-49).

Two amendments have been made to the CVFTL HCP. One, signed in 1999, transfers all duties, responsibilities, and authorities, previously held by TNC to CNLM. The other, signed the same year, allows the use of CVFTL HCP mitigation fees to acquire and manage lands within the designated sand source corridor to the Thousand Palms Preserve.

III. Relationship to Other Regional Conservation Programs

A. Existing Conservation Programs. Joshua Tree National Park occurs roughly three miles north of the northern boundary of the Thousand Palms Preserve. The Park includes the watershed where significant amounts (at least 5%, N. Lancaster and N. Meek pers. comm., and up to a third, estimated from recent (2000), Ikonos satellite imagery) of the aeolian sand feeding the sand dune habitat of the Preserve originates. There is wildlife movement between the Preserve and the Park as well. Desert bighorn sheep have been observed within the Preserve at least twice over the past ten years; they most likely came from sheep populations within the Park. Bobcat, coyote and kit fox populations within

the Preserve, because of the relatively small size of the Preserve, likely depend on regular movement and exchange between the open space areas north of the Preserve and the Preserve itself to maintain genetic and population viability. Over long time spans, Park - Preserve movements of smaller animals likely occur as well. Using a longer view, the movement of wildlife between the Park and the Preserve may be extremely important if climatic changes impact current habitat suitability.

The connection between the Preserve and the National Park, in terms of physical processes and wildlife movement, was recognized as the Coachella Valley Preserve System was being conceptualized and designed in 1984. Original Preserve designs included the protection of a broad area between the Park and the Preserve. Primarily to reduce short term costs, the private land between the Preserve and the Park was not included in the final design. There was an assumption that these lands would not develop soon, or at high enough densities, to impact the connection between these two conservation areas.

Other conservation lands with an influence on the Coachella Valley Preserve System include the San Geronio Wilderness, Mission Creek and the Big Morongo Canyon Area of Critical Environmental Concern. Each of these areas forms all or a portion of the sand source to the Willow Hole and Whitewater River Preserves. The corridors that provide for sand movement between these sand sources to the Preserves have been inadequately protected. Again, assumptions were made that no development would likely occur within active floodplains, therefore direct acquisition would be unnecessary.

B. Current Conservation Planning Efforts. Early in the 1990s there was a growing recognition that the Coachella Valley Preserve System was insufficient to provide long term population viability for the floral and faunal elements of the Coachella Valley that are either endemic, near endemic, or have a significant portion of their population occurring within this valley. These species have the potential of receiving protective listing from either the State or federal endangered species laws, and so present a barrier to future development planning that would otherwise be consistent with the CVFTL HCP. In response to this risk, a multiple species HCP (MSHCP) planning effort is underway. This planning effort has identified the Coachella Valley Preserve System as a cornerstone for the MSHCP effort, and builds on that system to provide increased viability for the ecosystems the preserve system protects. All programs and strategies proposed in this plan are designed to be consistent with those proposed MSHCP.

In 1990 the Coachella Valley Preserve System's Management Committee contracted with two separate researchers to determine the relative contribution of various watersheds in providing sand to the Thousand Palms Preserve dune ecosystem (Lancaster et. al 1993, Meek and Wasklewicz 1993, Wasklewicz and Meek 1995). Both investigations came up with the same conclusion: a series of canyons emerging from the Indio Hills, immediately

north of the town of Thousand Palms have provided the vast majority of sand that currently makes up the dune fields on the Preserve (farther back in time there is evidence that Thousand Palms Canyon was a more prominent sand source). Those canyons and the corridor connecting them to the Preserve are not in conservation ownership. The Coachella Valley MSHCP has as one of its major objectives the protection of that sand transport system (as well as protecting a corridor to Joshua Tree National Park). In recognition of the importance of protecting the sand source-corridor for the Thousand Palms Preserve, the USFWS has proposed a refuge expansion to include this critical component of the CVFTL habitat. An amendment to the CVFTL HCP adopted in 1999 already allows use of mitigation funds to be used to acquire and manage lands within the sand source-corridor area. CDFG has also initiated a process to allow acquisition of these lands with Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) funds. Finally, an Army Corps of Engineers - CVWD proposed flood control project in this same area may serve to provide some additional acquisition funds.